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ABSTRACT

Findings of an exploratory qualitative study of personality characteristics observed to exist among a sample of new "advertising creatives" are presented in this paper. Subjects, 13 copywriters and art directors participating in a training program at an advertising agency with global billings of $4 billion, were interviewed in depth concerning their jobs, which they had held for periods ranging from 15 days to 2 years. Basic themes and patterns were sought in the transcribed interviews. Results indicated that the characteristics of new creatives were consistent with many of the creative personality traits described in the professional literature, including: persistence, risk-taking, competitiveness, and determination. Findings suggest that, if creative characteristics can be cultivated, then educators should incorporate creativity-enhancing exercises into their curricula. Being aware of the characteristics found in new creatives can help students assess their own potential. Students can learn that virtually all creatives competing for jobs experience a certain amount of frustration and discouragement. A description of the subjects (informants) is attached. (Contains 36 references.) (RS)

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Personality Characteristics of New Advertising Creatives: What Educators Can Tell Students

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Abstract

This study is based on in-depth interviews with a sample of "new creatives" and seeks to uncover the personality characteristics which appear to contribute to their success in securing their first job and in performing subsequent creative duties. Interviews indicate that these new hires most often display characteristics of: determination, self-discipline, risk-taking, restlessness, curiosity, competitiveness and self confidence. Implications for advertising educators are also discussed.

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Personality Characteristics of New Advertising Creatives:
What Edueators Can Tell Students

The subject of human creativity has long been of interest in both academic and popular circles. Films such as The Agony and the Ecstasy, Lust for Life and Amadeus explore the lives of creative geniuses. Popular books focus on improving creativity in both personal and professional circles (c.f., Adams 1976; May 1975; von Oech, 1990).

Not surprisingly, this fascination with creativity is highly evident within the field of advertising. Indeed, many textbooks that focus on advertising creativity begin with discussions of the personality characteristics that are required for copywriters and art directors to succeed. For example, Nelson (1989) notes that creatives must be: restless, independent thinkers, and "master gripers" who are never satisfied with current solutions. Burton (1991) believes resilience and a genuine interest in people are the necessary traits of a creative. Likewise, both Hafer and White (1989) and Dunn et al. (1990) provide "laundry lists" of creative characteristics that appear to be requirements for successful copywriters and art directors.

Interestingly, however, little empirical research exists that actually explores which individual characteristics contribute to the success of advertising copywriters and art directors. Yet for a number of reasons, exploring this issue would be of great value to advertising educators and students alike. First, it would be extremely useful for educators to provide students with a real-world depiction of the types of individuals who seem to be more successful at securing and keeping creative jobs. Second, given the amount of anecdotal evidence presented in the creative texts, it is important to begin conducting research that

confirms or refutes the purported characteristics related to success as an advertising creative. Third, understanding the characteristics that may contribute to the success of copywriters and/or art directors may help students determine whether they should attempt to develop those particular aspects of their personality, or whether they would be better suited in some other career.

Thus, the purpose of this paper is to present findings of an exploratory qualitative study on the personality characteristics that we observed to exist among a sample of new "advertising creatives." Qualitative research techniques are enjoying a resurgence among the social science disciplines (Hirschman, 1989: Belk 1991); however, Katz (1992) has noted that qualitative methods are underutilized by advertising researchers. As such, we explore the following research questions through qualitative, in-depth interviewing methodology:

1.) Which personality characteristics appeared to contribute to the success of new creatives, as they sought to secure their first jobs in advertising?

2.) Which personality characteristics appear to contribute to the success of new creatives, as they perform the duties of either copywriter or art director?

In order to place our research within the larger context of research on creativity, we will first review the literature that has examined the topic of creative characteristics.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

On the whole, the literature reveals creativity to be a broad and subjective construct. Researchers have examined the personality characteristics (Davis & Rimm, 1977; Johnson &

Hatch, 1990; McClelland, 1987), psychological characteristics (Schiever, 1985; Yau, 1991; Maslow, 1971), physical aspects of creativity (Davis & Rimm, 1977; Farley, 1984) and the nature of past experience (Pickard, 1990; Matson, 1990; Matson, 1991; Gilchrist, 1982), in samples of both adults and children. Some studies support the finding that certain characteristics -- self-confidence, energy, idealism, sensation seeking, and complexity -- are descriptive of creative individuals. However, the fact that these studies employ a wide range of methods, such as the Group Inventory for Finding Creative Talent (GIFT) and the Khatena Torrance Creative Inventory, means that the results across studies are often incomparable and inconsistent. Thus, their applicability to the study of advertising creativity is problematic.

Fortunately, however, some researchers have examined aspects of creativity related specifically to advertising.

Advertising Creativity

A few studies have examined creativity within the context of advertising. Reasoning that level of empathy would be an important predictor of the ability to succeed as an advertising creative, Auer (1976) administered the Johnson Type I and Type II empathy scales to samples of students enrolled in advertising, journalism and business courses. She found that advertising and journalism students did not differ in their levels of empathy, but that these two groups did exhibit more empathy than the business school students.

Likewise, Reid and Rotfeld (1976) hypothesized that associative reasoning is an important criterion in terms of one's ability to generate novel ideas. They define associative reasoning as the ability to bring "previously unrelated facts into associations so that

previously unrealized relationships between them become apparent" (1976, p. 25). A sample of undergraduate students was given a scale measuring level of associative reasoning and attitudes as well as a profile comprised of the characteristics of creative people. The authors found that: 1) high levels of associative reasoning seemed related to high levels of advertising creativity; 2) high levels of associative reasoning seemed positively related to attitudes about one's creative ability; and 3) scores on the creative ability profiles were positively correlated with scores on the associative scale and the attitude scale.

While not offering empirical evidence, Vlasko and Mokwa (1986) propose a model they argue can contribute to understanding the important aspects of advertising creativity in particular. Specifically, their "Janusian model" suggests that a creative person must be able to "conceive and utilize two or more contradictory concepts, ideas or images simultaneously" (Rothenberg, 1971; in Blasko and Mokwa, 1986). For instance, creative advertising should reflect the tension that exists between contradictory opposites, such as in the example "Devilishly Good Taste, 90 Saintly Calories" (p. 48).

The last study examining personality characteristics in creative adults actually employed a sample of advertising creatives (Hovland, Wilcox and Hoffman, 1988). Specifically, the authors administered the much used Creative Quotient Test to a sample of art directors and copywriters. They found that two-thirds of their sample earned above-average scores on the test, while nearly one-fourth of the sample earned average scores. Furthermore, both copywriters and art directors did have certain characteristics in common. Namely, creatives were:

> Open to their feelings, intuitive, risk-takers, enthusiastic, motivated, nonconformist, hard workers, goal-directed, imaginative and self-confident. They also express feminine (if man) and masculine (if woman) interests, like the unknown, do not mind being alone, are not afraid to ask questions (curious), are interested in aesthetics and enjoy toying with ideas (p. RC-143).

SUMMARY

The literature indicates that a wide variety of characteristics is prevalent in creative people. However, since little empirical data exists that examines the characteristics of advertising creatives, opportunity exists for more extensive research on trait similarities among creative advertising people, as multiple measures are necessary to insure reliability of any existing theories. Therefore, the present study contributes to the growing body of literature on characteristics of advertising creatives. Specifically, we discuss how many characteristics -- such as risk taking, determination and curiosity -- are highly prevalent in new advertising copywriters and art directors.

METHOD

During the summer of 1991, the second author of this study completed a two-week, faculty-in-residence internship in the Creative Recruiting department of an advertising agency with global billings of approximately $4 billion. During that time, thirteen copywriters and art directors participating in the agency training program were interviewed in-depth. McCracken (1988) notes that a sample size of as little as eight is sufficient when conducting qualitative research due to the depth of information that is secured when conducting personal interviews.

The six copywriters and seven art directors interviewed had held their positions from fifteen days to two years. The average length of employment was 11.9 months. "New" creatives were chosen for several reasons. Much can be learned from "new hires" whose educational experience is fresh in their minds. Additionally, little research addresses the important characteristics necessary to secure jobs from the perspective of aspiring creatives -- from those who can discuss the ways in which they prepared for interviewing, prepared their portfolios and competed conceptually with those longer-tenured employees.

Eight of the participants were male and five were female; all were college graduates. Eleven of the thirteen creatives received a bachelor's degree in a visual or communications discipline. The length of time they had spent on portfolio preparation ranged from five months to two years. Appendix A provides more detailed informant information.

Each interview lasted from 45 minutes to one hour. The basic interviewing procedure employed is outlined in McCracken (1988). That is, the interviewer followed an interview schedule, but also encouraged informants to discuss emerging topics that related to advertising creativity and/or advertising education. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed.

The resulting text was then analyzed in a procedure commonly followed by interpretive researchers. That is, the authors sought basic themes or patterns in the text, and provided verbatims from the informants that best illustrated these patterns.

FINDINGS

As previously stated, the research questions were concerned with identifying the personality characteristics which appeared to help new advertising creatives secure their

positions as copywriters or art directors. As the literature on personality characteristics suggests, overall personality type (e.g., extroversion or introversion) is not related to one's creative tendencies. However, the results suggest many similarities with respect to personality characteristics that helped these creatives gain their entry-level positions and subsequently become successful. The seven most commonly seen characteristics are discussed below.

Determination

The most common personality characteristic that emerged from our interviews was determination. Within the context of securing an advertising job, determination is defined here as not giving up until the job was obtained. Not surprisingly, some of the clearest examples of determination occurred among the creatives who had not acquired formal schooling in portfolio preparation. These creatives typically prepared their "books" while holding down other jobs. Rick and Chuck were two such creatives:

> R: I took a job [in client services] and worked for a year. And I said, "Nope, nope... I really want to be a writer." So I quit and a friend and I took a class...called Ad Ed.... It was like $300 and I had to drive down 1 1/2 hours every Monday night during the week...I come from a really aggressive family so people who want to do certain things, we do those things no matter how we get around to doing it.

> C: [Working in media] I didn't even know you needed a book... The chief creative was my mentor...he'd spend time with me maybe once every two weeks for an hour...he started giving me freelance to do there. And I was still doing media. I was working my tail off, starting to be successful.

For those creatives who had completed their portfolios in a school setting, determination became essential in their attempt to secure their first jobs. Vickie noted:

> I went to New York and I had a nibble at DMB&B. It didn't work out at the last minute. I had like 13 interviews, callbacks, a headhunter. I really felt good after each interview. They were like "We love you, but we have to talk to this other person." It just went on and on...for two weeks. Don't give up. It's easy to get discouraged... keep the stuff in your book fresh, just keep working on it. Don't get discouraged because timing is key.

Likewise, Cindy advised:

> Don't take no for an answer. Be persistent as all hell. Well shoot, I was more or less trying to do this for two years. I was waitressing, a typist, I mean, I went to the University of Michigan, and I was a typist! It was very difficult, very humbling... So I would say, "Get on the phone, get in to see people."

Finally, Stan observed that while he was showing the recruiter his portfolio: "I was here a lot. I was here about 45 times. That's the way you gotta do it. You get a little paranoid about being a pest, but I got in."

The fact that determination was also necessary once creatives were "on the job" became evident as our informants described the daily workings within the agency. Chuck noted: "There's a lot of geniuses around here and I'm not one of them. So I make up for it by hard work. [Comes in at] 7:30. I love working on the weekends, too, because no one's here."

Self-Discipline

Related to determination is an overriding tendency for these creatives to exhibit initiative and self-discipline while preparing their portfolios, competing on the job market and working as writers or art directors. For example, when asked to give advice to students

interested in creative careers, Cindy and Barbara replied:

> C: It's not the kind of thing you can do half-heartedly. You have to put your soul in it, if that's what you want. It's not something you can dabble in. I personally think, if it's really what you want, then you should start studying the award books, start seeing what reels you can get of great commercials, things like Archive magazine.

> B: Ask them if they think that they are really creative and could do that for a long time. I mean, always under pressure, come up with new ideas all the time. I mean, 50 different ideas for one thing. Because that's what you have to do.

Creatives often describe how their visits to recruiters and creative directors led to revision of their own work. Indeed, the ability to accept that such revision was a necessary step in creating a successful portfolio seemed to be a turning point for our informants. Furthermore, they expressed regret when aspiring creatives seemed to not realize the need to revise work. Stan noted:

> It seems maybe a dozen people have shown me their books, have come in to talk to me. And I tell them what to do and they don't do it. Nobody's come back, nobody's improved their book...They're bartenders or working for Daddy.

Once the job is secured, self-discipline remains important. Vernon noted that creatives must be able to avoid falling in love with their own ideas: "That's something you have to be able to do...I had ideas I want to hang onto real bad. But you have to say, 'Nope, gotta start all over and do it by tomorrow morning.'" Likewise, Lou noted:

> I find when you're writing some silly little 30-second radio ad, it doesn't just come. You have to write it, revise it, keep doing it. You don't just write it once and say, "Here's your ad." Maybe some can, but few can...I also think that often people think of the creative role as fun, easy, spontaneous. But it's not really that

way. It can be fun, but it also requires discipline.

Risk-Taking

Another common characteristic that emerged from our interviews was the tendency of many of our informants to exhibit patterns of risk-taking, both in terms of the ways in which they secured their creative jobs and throughout their lives in general. For example, Lou had given up a lucrative career in mergers and acquisitions at a Wall Street firm to return to an Ivy League school for an M.B.A. He later secured a job in client services:

> Very early on I started making notes of these guys who had switched from account service to creative...Finally, a year and a half ago, I got to the point where I just couldn't take it any more. [Called the creative recruiter] And he told me the process, which was to put together a book. Come down, show it, he'd critique. Come back show it, he'd critique. And if it got to a point where it was good enough, then he'd give me a job. So it took me over a year.

Other creatives, such as Andy and Christine, described how they were willing to risk poverty to secure their jobs:

> A: It was supposed to take me a year and a half to get out of the Portfolio Center. I went for six months. I ran out of money. I had no idea what I was gonna do. I was engaged to be married...I just worked my little behind off and put together a book that was good enough to come up here and get a job...I decided to give myself five days.... I came up here, I probably had 20 interviews. It turned out really well. I don't know if I was in the right place at the right time. I had three offers when I came [here].

> C: I decided I wanted to go out of graphics into advertising. And I just knew, there's no way I'm going to work 40 hours a week, come home, work on my book. So I sold everything, moved to Atlanta, went to the Portfolio Center. To tell you the truth Joe's Advertising and Garage could have offered me a

> job. By the time I finished The Portfolio Center I was broke. Luckily for me it was [here].

Another area where risk-taking was evident was in the design and execution of self-promotions that these creatives sent to agencies. Vickie noted:

> I took a stock picture of myself, black and white and put myself in a group of people, and I said, "You can draw on a lot of talent with Vickie." And off to the side I'd put a pencil, and I'd drawn a moustache on myself, and some funny ears, just different things. I'd blackened in my teeth, just real quirky.

Likewise, Cindy said:

> I actually did a self-promo where I sent around a singing telegram to this recruiter at [another agency]. Because they had just picked up all this business and I thought it would be a good idea.

Restlessness/Need for Stimulation

A fourth personality characteristic that was quite evident among these new copywriters and art directors could be described as restlessness, or the tendency to become bored or stifled easily. Many informants mentioned that the reason they enjoyed their job so much was because it was so varied. Cindy noted: "I like the fact that as a creative, you don't have to wear a suit every day. That you can behave in an unconventional manner and nobody cares. That your days are not always the same." Likewise, Lisa said that she enjoyed her job because she "couldn't think of anything else I could stand to do all day."

Of the thirteen creatives interviewed, only <u>three</u> actually saw themselves holding a similar job in five years. Andy stated flatly, "I can't see myself doing this for the rest of my life. Gonna get bored with it. I can feel things that are gonna wear." Likewise, Lou noted:

"I think I'd like to design...like products, like clothing or ties, or something really cool. It sort of takes this whole notion of creativity one step further because it's more tangible."

Interestingly, most of the creatives who were restless were also the ones who were risk-takers. Thus, it appears that they were more willing to consider giving up their current jobs to pursue other avenues in the future.

Curiosity

Not unrelated to restlessness is the personality characteristic of curiosity, or interest in many activities and experiences. Many informants described how they pursued a very wide range of subjects and extracurricular activities while in college. Vickie noted:

> I took history of world culture, music classes, went to strange films, film festivals. Just do something you've never done before, something different every day. Everything you do just adds to advertising. That's what I feel. Just a new perspective on things.

Likewise, Alex said:

> This is gonna sound really weird, but I like to go to flea markets and find neat gadgets. I like gadgets. Those are the greatest. I don't know if that's been an influence, but then again...flea markets, there's a lot of different personalities, and I think it's reflective of the kind of wares they show.

In addition to a general curiosity about life, creatives also revealed how important it was for them to retain a curiosity about advertising. Chuck noted, "I read anything on advertising...Ogilvy on Advertising, Chiat Day, awards books...." In response to a question about how students can better prepare themselves for careers in creative, Rick said:

> Have your parents for Christmas buy you a subscription to different advertising publications [like] CA (Communication Arts), buy the One Show book every year. Because when you look in there, you'll know what's good. And it'll train your mind. And when you read things, and you observe life, you can put it in the terms of advertising.

Curiosity not only was reflected in wide interests, but in the need of many of our informants to constantly try new, off-beat experiences throughout their lives. Rick reported that when he was younger:

> I travelled for a year in a group called "Up With People..."...I mean, some of the things that people did, it really intrigued me...One particular example...I stayed with a host family in Pennsylvania. And my host mother, her job was to stick those little pins in shirts. That's not done by a machine, that's done by hand. She can pin up those shirts faster than we can unpin them. And I'm like, this would make such a cool ad.

Likewise, Andy noted:

> In college I was really into doing different things. As far as living in different areas and doing different jobs and stuff. One summer I worked in an amusement park. I did an internship in Boston because I'd never been to the East Coast. I went to school in Atlanta for a while. Just traveling as much as I could, going places that no one goes as a tourist, hanging out in the local yokel. Because that's where you learn about the areas. I think I just have a general curiosity about people, life....

Competitiveness and Confidence

The final two personality characteristics that emerged consistently throughout our interviews were competitiveness and confidence. These two traits related to creatives' belief in their ability to "hold their own" while putting together their portfolios, seeking a job and competing against other creative groups within the agency. Creatives discussed the importance of developing and exhibiting both confidence and a competitive spirit while taking

portfolio courses. Vickie noted:

> I feel like our class got really competitive...and it's really tough. We lost a lot of people throughout the process. It really built those callouses...I felt like I fought my way through at times. It hurts at first. But later, you get more objective.

Likewise, Rick reflected on how, as his work became more competitive in class, his confidence improved:

> At that point, it was like, OK, I'm going to come up with some really good campaigns, because I know I can. A couple of weeks into a class like that--because our class was really competitive--and when your ads consistently float to the top of the pile, and you go, "I get this, and these other people don't get it."

Once again, the need for these personality traits to be transferred from the classroom to the conference room was evident. Rick commented that within the agency, many different creative groups were often assigned to compete on the same campaign: "The competition here is stiff, it really is. If you're in a group and you've got six teams working on something, you can bet that you're not gonna see a smidgen of their stuff until the day of the creative review." Likewise, Chuck commented that competitiveness and confidence must carry over into presentation style, not just in the ability to create strong conceptual work:

> There's some slick presenters you're going up against your third day at work that have won Gold Lions (at Cannes) and you're nervous...You have to know how to present...because a good presentation can make bad work look good, but a bad presentation can just kill good work.

DISCUSSION/IMPLICATIONS

The main purpose of this exploratory study was to shed light on the personality characteristics necessary for "new creatives" to secure their first jobs and to help make them successful and competitive employees. As Sweeney (1991) notes, the actual number of jobs in creative is declining. Thus, it is critical for both students and educators to be aware of the characteristics that should be nurtured to ensure success. However, scant research exists specifically examining these traits in advertising creatives, particularly from the perspective of the new hire. The results of this study suggest that the characteristics of new creatives are consistent with many of the creative personality traits described in the literature, including: persistence, risk-taking, competitiveness and determination. The self-reported experiences of these advertising creatives are important learning tools and provide useful first-hand insights for both educators and students.

Educator Implications

If one takes the position that some of the creative characteristics found in this study can be cultivated, then it is important for educators to incorporate creativity-enhancing exercises into their curricula. von Oech (1990) contends that most people are not creative since they "don't need to be creative for most of what they do." However, if creativity is to be nurtured, an optimal atmosphere and tone in the classroom should be established to encourage the development of risk-taking, conceptualization skills, independent thinking and healthy competition.

Additionally, since one of the characteristics of successful creatives that emerged was an interest in many things, educators could advise students to take classes from a variety of

disciplines to help them cultivate new interests to hone their creative skills. Likewise, creative instructors could incorporate and relate various aspects of popular culture into their classroom so that students could experience as much as possible.

Finally, the information gleaned from this study could assist educators in presenting a realistic portrait of agency life. It is one thing for a textbook to suggest that students must be dedicated and hard-working to create a winning portfolio, yet quite another for a practitioner to relate the countless hours spent on creating an effective book. Additionally, educators can forewarn those students who will not have the opportunity to take multiple portfolio courses that they may need further study at a trade school or a similar program.

Student Implications

There is much practical information which students can glean from this study as well. Most importantly, being aware of the characteristics found in new creatives can help students assess not only their potential but also the dedication and persistence required to achieve success in the creative business. With full knowledge of what is entailed, students can decide whether they wish to pursue a career in creative.

By examining this study, students can learn that virtually all creatives competing for jobs experience a certain amount of frustration and discouragement. For some, securing a job was a matter of timing. For most, it was hard work, long hours and constant portfolio updating and revising that produced successful results. Furthermore, it is important for students to be aware that once creatives are hired, the scene is not quite as glamorous as popular media might suggest. It is normal for successful creatives to experience rejection of their ideas and to work long, unpredictable and pressure-filled hours.

LIMITATIONS/EXTENSIONS

The present study is admittedly an exploratory one and examines the experiences of new hires within one large agency. These limitations notwithstanding, the research contributes to our understanding of the discipline and determination that new hires must develop to become successful. Additionally, the exploratory study with the current sample suggests several avenues of extension.

For example, future research could examine creatives' experiences across a variety of different agencies of various sizes. Additional studies could compare the advice and experiences of new hires to those more "seasoned" creatives. Finally, longitudinal studies could examine a sample of creatives as they advance, mature and respond to the dynamic nature of the advertising business. Regardless of which areas seem the most promising, it is hoped that this study will encourage advertising educators to tap into the insights and experience of both new and more experienced creatives alike.

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Appendix A

Description of Informants

Alex: is an art director who had been with the agency for fifteen days. He obtained a Bachelor of Design with a minor in advertising from the University of Florida. Alex supplemented his education at the Portfolio Center.

Andy: is a copywriter who has been with the agency for almost two years. Andy received a degree in Journalism from the University of Missouri. He then attended the Portfolio Center.

Barbara: is an art director who has been at the agency for two years. She attended the University of Hamburg (she is German), a graphic design school in Germany, and the Portfolio Center.

Christine: has been an art director for a year and three months. She received a degree in Graphic Design from the University of Maryland. After holding several design jobs, she attended the Portfolio Center.

Chuck: has been a writer at the agency for seven months. He majored in Spanish and International Affairs at the University of Colorado. Prior to this job, he was an assistant media buyer.

Cindy: has been a copywriter for one year and eight months. She received a degree in Communications from the University of Michigan. Cindy attended Ad Ed while working as a copy typist.

Kevin: has been an art director for four months. He also received a B.S. in Advertising from the University of Texas at Austin.

Lisa: is an art director who has been with the agency for one year and three months. After working as a retail graphic designer for ten years, she attended the Portfolio Center.

Lou: has been a copywriter for four weeks. Lou graduated from Williams College in 1982. After two years with Merrill-Lynch, Lou obtained an M.B.A. from Harvard. Lou then worked in account services for two and a half years.

Rick: has been a copywriter for three months. Rick received a B.S. in Advertising from Marquette University. He then worked for an agency in account services, while supplementing his education with Ad Ed.

Stan: is art director who has been with the agency for one and a half years. He received a degree in Graphic Design from Southern Illinois University.

Vernon: is an art director who has been with the agency for seven months. He received a B.S. in Advertising from the University of Texas at Austin.

Vickie: is a copywriter who has been in the training program for seven months. She obtained a B.S. in Advertising from the University of Texas at Austin.

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